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ABSTRACT

The Families Matter series of papers from the Harvard Family Research Project advances the concept of family-centered child care, advocating an approach to early childhood education that addresses the development of the child and family together. Grounded in family support principles, which build on family strengths and work from a community's culture and resources, family-centered child care incorporates positive attitudes about working with parents and practical activities to serve the family. Asserting that a key place to promote widespread use of family support principles and practices is through the child care training system, the papers that make up the series focus on how the child care field trains providers to include family support. This paper discusses how to work with children and families from diverse backgrounds, as well as some of the challenging issues raised by working with families having differing values, cultural norms, and experiences. Stressing the importance of basing parent involvement activities on two-way communication, it presents a practical model for establishing and nurturing family-supportive parent-provider relationships. The paper acknowledges the challenges to building successful cross-cultural relationships and describes an array of strategies for increasing provider awareness of the environment in which families raise their children and meet their daily obligations, and for gaining empathy for each family's unique circumstances. Contains 15 references. (EV)

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FAMILIES MATTER

Parent-Provider Partnerships

Parker Anderson

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Parent–Provider Partnerships

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Cambridge, MA
1998

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HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT
Founded in 1983 by Dr. Heather Weiss, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is today at the center of a national movement to strengthen and support American families. HFRP's pathbreaking research provides practitioners, researchers, and policymakers with timely, insightful information about effective family support initiatives.

Disseminating its research widely, HFRP links people, programs, ideas, and resources together to create innovative family support programs and services and family-sustaining policies. HFRP's research helps states create systems to monitor and assess programs and services, and helps communities better integrate family support services in neighborhood programs. Using HFRP data, schools are learning more about the specific benefits of parent involvement and the best strategies for successfully engaging the entire family. HFRP's research findings are enabling practitioners to design culturally appropriate programs, and helping training and education programs effectively prepare teachers to work with families.

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PREFACE

The Families Matter series of papers advances the concept of family-centered child care, advocating an approach to early childhood education that addresses the development of the child and family together. Grounded in family support principles which build on family strengths and work from a community's culture and resources, family-centered child care incorporates positive attitudes about working with parents and practical activities to serve the family.

A key place to promote widespread use of family support principles and practices is through the child care training system. This system reaches many types of providers and greatly influences their attitudes and practices. In addition, training sets professional norms and standards — and could guide the child care field to emphasize family support in the definition of quality child care.

The papers that make up the series focus on how the child care field trains providers to include family support. The papers present both a systemic view of child care training as well as hands-on experiences in training child care providers and delivering family-supportive child care. An accompanying Resource Guide for Family-Centered Child Care offers an annotated bibliography of training materials that child care providers and trainers can use to improve their efforts to support families.

While they write from distinct perspectives, each author in this series endorses the need for integrating family support and child care training. The authors concede that there are structural and other challenges to training child care providers to deliver family support, yet they share a wealth of insights on how to accomplish change.

Each paper includes a description of how family support fits into the child care arena and suggests specific content for family support training. Acknowledging that it can be difficult to integrate family support practices into child care settings, each paper discusses the major challenges to establishing family-supportive child care programs and provides strategies and action steps to make family

support part of child care training and delivery. More specifically, Families Matter covers the following topics:

- An outline of the structure of the child care delivery and training systems and an analysis of the problems posed by fragmentation on quality standards, career development, and incorporating a family support approach.
- A summary of family support training and credentialing initiatives, as well as alternative training models to address the fragmented training system characteristic of both the child care and family support fields.
- A description of training provided by a program that focuses on the "hard issues" in the parent-provider relationship and ways to overcome barriers to parent participation.
- A "how to" guide on preparing providers to work with families that are culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse and strategies to promote family involvement in the child care program.

HFRP believes that an improved child care training system that integrates family support principles and advances a logical, progressive path for professional development will lead to higher quality front-line practice. If the barriers to integrating family support and child care can be overcome, we will have a substantially stronger system of early childhood services that is better able to enhance the development of children by including their families in the learning process.

Parent-Provider Partnerships

This paper discusses how to work with children and families from diverse backgrounds, as well as some of the challenging issues raised by working with families having differing values, cultural norms, and experiences. Stressing the importance of basing parent involvement activities on two-way communication, it presents a very practical model for establishing and nurturing family-supportive parent-provider partnerships. The paper acknowledges the challenges to building successful cross-cultural relationships and describes an array of strategies for increasing provider awareness of the environment in which families raise their children and meet their daily obligations, as well as for gaining empathy for each family's unique circumstances.

This study was a collaborative effort. HFRP is grateful to Kate Wrean for her editing of the reports in this series. The following HFRP staff members provided much-appreciated help with the production of this report: Atissa Banuazizi, Sybilla Dorros, Ann Hannum, Holly Kreider, Phuong Le, M. Elena Lopez, Maura Pelham, and Scott Wilder.

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Understanding Parent Involvement

For child care providers to build positive relationships with families and provide comprehensive educational services, a supportive, family-focused approach is crucial. Families want providers to know what expectations they have for their children and of their children's learning environment. Likewise, they want to know and understand providers' expectations and to support providers and programs in their efforts to teach children. Most attentive parents seek regular interaction with providers and program staff.

When child care providers and the families they serve come from different cultures or speak different languages, providers may need to try varied approaches to engage parents and family members or even modify their usual manner of communication. In general, providers discover that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, like most parents when questioned about their children's learning and development, want to see their children grow, learn, and become contributing members of society. Even with different cultural backgrounds, all parents want reassurance that their children will receive care and nurturing and develop academically in the best and most appropriate way. Regardless of English language proficiency or literacy skills, parents care deeply about their children's educational success (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

Most child care providers encourage and value the active involvement of parents in their children's education. Whether located in a home, center, or school, programs affirm that the partnership between providers and families supports children in their early learning, affects their attitudes toward the learning environment, and helps them achieve later school success. Tinajero (1992) and Correa (1989) report that children's academic success and accomplishments are significantly influenced by parental involvement and support. And beyond being critical to children's academic development, parent involvement has an impact on children's cognitive development, discipline, self-esteem, and motivation (Auerbach, 1989; Greenberg, 1989).

Therefore, it is important for providers to welcome parents to the classroom and child care community, involve them in learning activities with their children, and encourage parent meetings and dialogues.

Parent involvement aims to link parents, family members, and others who care for children in a home-program-community collaboration. Through this participation parents and kin caregivers connect with the child care program, entering into mutually beneficial partnerships that support children's educational and emotional development. Parent involvement can occur at local, state, regional, and national levels; in large center-based programs or small family child care homes; within or outside the child care classroom or home; and through group activities, organized meetings, or informal one-on-one conversations.

Reflecting the growing recognition of the benefits of parent involvement, the Department of Education's National Education Goals Panel (1996) cited parent involvement as a critical contributing factor in the educational development of children. The goal pertaining to parent involvement states that, "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." Likewise, many early childhood programs stress the importance of promoting parent involvement as a valuable learning resource to all children, regardless of their age or child care setting.

Although most program directors and child care providers want to build strong connections and a constructive rapport with the parents and families of children in their programs, teachers, schools, and parents report difficulty accomplishing that goal (Auerbach, 1989; Greenberg, 1989). Even child care programs with successful parent involvement components must undertake continuous efforts to ensure continued high participation. To implement a parent involvement program, providers must thoroughly analyze the community to be served and develop appropriate strategies for reaching out to families and bringing them into the learning environment. Successful programs demonstrate an understanding of involvement as having different meanings to different people and endeavor to find out what events and services families and communities want, need, and will use.

Child care programs can facilitate parent involvement by helping parents:

- Stay informed about the program's philosophy, rules, and regulations; program goals; and the educational process, program developments, and their children's progress
- Participate in center activities
- Support and contribute to the local community for the benefit of their children and the program as a whole

This paper discusses how to work with children and families from diverse backgrounds and examines some of the challenging issues raised by working with families' different values, cultural norms, and experiences. It suggests strategies for increasing providers' awareness of the varied worlds in which families meet their daily obligations and raise their children, and strategies for nurturing parent-provider relationships. The author also presents a model for establishing supportive family partnerships, which she developed and implemented while working as the bilingual early childhood coordinator with public schools in Washington, D.C. Although this was a school-based program, its experiences reveal valuable lessons applicable to early childhood programs in other settings.

A MODEL FOR ESTABLISHING FAMILY-SUPPORTIVE PARTNERSHIPS THAT ENCOMPASS COMMUNITY DIVERSITY

The goal of parent involvement is to strengthen the ties among the child care program, home, and community by making sure that parents and programs have similar expectations of supporting children's learning process (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The foundation of all parent involvement efforts should be open, two-way communication, in contrast to so-called "one-way" communication that often is mistakenly considered parent involvement. The one-way communication model seeks to convey information from the program to the home, but leaves little if any opportunity for reciprocal sharing of information from the home or community back to the program. Starting a parent involvement program is challenging because those designing and implementing the program need to work on a variety of tasks simultaneously. The following sections outline a plan for establishing a community-based parent involvement program as an alternative to the one-way model.

Designate a leader and identify stakeholders.

In order to introduce a new parent involvement program successfully, the child care program must name a leader or point person responsible for overseeing implementation of the program. That leader might be a classroom teacher, teacher's aide, program administrator, or parent volunteer. It is imperative, however, that the individual appointed as leader know that the program values the parent involvement project and will support the leader's efforts. One of the leader's first tasks is to identify a core group of stakeholders who are interested in advocating, promoting, and participating in the parent involvement component. Ideally, this core would encompass a broad selection of individuals, including providers, parents, and community representatives. The most important qualification is a commitment to establishing a quality parent involvement component.

Develop, administer, and analyze a parent involvement survey.

The leader and stakeholders together form a team whose responsibilities include gathering information about the child care program's current parent involvement activities, observing actual parent involvement practices, making follow-up inquiries to confirm the information received, assessing and analyzing data, and recommending changes to the parent involvement component. Team members need to probe providers' and parents' impressions of what has occurred in the past, what currently takes place, and what changes they feel can or should take place. Based on previously collected data and conversations with providers, parents, and administrators of previous events, the survey results serve to build a collective memory of how the program's parent involvement component has evolved since its beginning.

Although the leader and stakeholder team does not need to interview every person on the program staff or all families, it is important to gather information from representatives of the different groups in the program: providers, administrative personnel, parents, and other family members. Observing actual practices enables the team to discover discrepancies between what the people interviewed say and do. For example, if the survey reveals that the program community values the parent involvement component, the team should try to observe how and where providers and administrative staff communicate the importance of involvement to parents and families; parents need to know that they are a valued and important part of the program community. This may be apparent through the manner in which providers and other staff members welcome parents, invite them into classrooms, send information home, and make themselves accessible to parents.

Initial data gathering and observations lead to additional questions and requests for clarification to confirm that the team understands the information received. For example, it is vital to ask providers and parents to define what they mean by active involvement and how they measure it (in number of hours involved, frequency of involvement, or degree of effort required for the activity). If the level of involvement has changed, the team must determine the point of comparison, since some people think

in terms of how much they participated in prior years while others recall how much they were involved when older children were in the program.

Through careful examination and review of how the parent involvement component has operated until now, programs can avoid repeating previous mistakes which, though unintentional, may leave parents feeling excluded and make them feel as if their concerns are not valued. While carrying out initial interviews, observing program practices, and asking follow-up questions, team members should be alert to direct and indirect suggestions about what changes in the parent involvement component the participants are willing to make and try to ascertain what types of changes would be difficult for them to make. The team needs to find out what providers and parents consider important in parent involvement and which aspects of including parents seem to pose problems, causing both providers and parents to hesitate, doubt, or resist attempts at parent involvement. Team members must develop an appreciation of participants' needs and issues in order to design an appropriate action plan. Probing their thoughts about potential changes gives participants the opportunity to voice ideas while programmatic decisions are still in the process of being made. Moreover, asking participants to look at the parent involvement component in this light prepares them in advance for the concept of change, thus easing the transition to new ways of doing things.

Finally, as the team moves on to analyzing the results of the comprehensive survey process and then recommending changes, the program directors must remind all participants that the team's purpose is to spearhead an initiative to integrate and support an enhanced parent involvement component within the program. It is critical for the program community to understand that the leader and stakeholder team are not in a supervisory role or in a position to pass judgment on people or practices: Each member has equal input in the joint effort to carry out a methodical evaluation of which parent involvement activities providers and parents believe are beneficial and which are not.

Make an effort to communicate with parents in the language spoken at home and make communications as convenient as possible for parents.

Building partnerships with families takes time (Tabors, 1997), and communications sent to parents and parent-provider conferences are two critical means of starting a healthy two-way relationship. Communications regarding program activities fulfill the very important function of keeping parents current with program events and helping them understand the goals of specific activities. To ensure that all families are well-informed, however, the program should send its written communique to the home in both English and the language spoken in the home. At the same time, programs must take into account that some families are not literate in their native language and may rely on someone else who speaks their language to either read or translate the written newsletter or notice. Thus it is important to send the communication with English on one side and the other language on the other side.

In a single setting, meeting the needs of families representing a number of languages can be more complicated. In this case, providers must determine what resources are available within the program and broader community to assist in translating the written document into other languages. They must also establish a system for checking the accuracy of the translations. Other options for communicating to parents that may be more efficient when the need for multiple translations exists include setting up a voice mailbox recording the pertinent information, starting a telephone tree that designates one parent to contact two other parents and so on down the line, or identifying parent and community volunteers to lead meetings in which they verbally share information with small groups of families. When possible, programs should take advantage of the fact that, particularly with new immigrants, some parents speak or understand more than one language. For instance, a Brazilian might understand sufficient Spanish to get the gist of a bulletin or conversation.

When including parent conferences in their parent involvement component, programs need to ensure that providers approach them as a mutual exchange of information and ideas, rather than a one-way communication from the provider to the parent. Likewise, the family-supportive program will solicit parents'

opinions on the best time to schedule conferences. For example, some parents might prefer to meet in the morning, because evening appointments disrupt their evening routines or interfere with their going from one job to another. Evening meetings also may be a cause of concern for personal safety. In general, parents and families are eager to support providers' efforts to make themselves understood and available and are appreciative of flexible scheduling and the consideration given to their language and cultural differences.

Sample Parent Involvement Questionnaire

Date: _____

Name of person interviewed: _____

Position (parent, provider, other): _____

	QUESTIONS			
ACTIVITIES	What happened before?	What is currently taking place?	What changes do you suggest?	Comments/ notes
Gather information				
Observe				
Seek confirmation				
Results/ analysis				
Recommen-dations				

The Innovative "Sharing, Modeling, and Caring Initiatives"

As a result of responses to its parent involvement questionnaire, one program began a set of innovative, family-supportive literacy activities:

A school-based early childhood education program wanted parents and family members to read to their children more and developed a three-pronged approach to family-supportive literacy called the "Sharing, Modeling, and Caring Initiatives" based on ideas generated by parents and providers. Activities included:

- Together, teachers and families visited local libraries and bookstores. Some parents had never entered a bookstore, while others did not know how to get around in a library. Through these shared outings, parents and teachers learned what the library offered, including resources available in other languages. In bookstores and the book areas of large discount stores, they found discounted children's books.
- Teachers noticed that parents chose books by their outside covers without looking inside to examine the appropriateness of the stories' content, pictures, and words. As a result, teachers decided to conduct short 20-minute lessons for parents on how to select age-appropriate books that would sustain their children's interest. The program maintained these lessons as a regular component of its parent involvement component, conducting them once a month in the morning and afternoon.
- Following a parent's suggestion, the program established a book exchange with a bring-one, take-one borrowing policy.
- Because parents and teachers alike saw, through the book exchange, that children were not treating the books well, teachers integrated learning how to care for books into their weekly classroom lessons.
- Teachers demonstrated to parents how to read books to young children, to multi-age groups of children, and to children before nap time through the program's modeling initiative.
- One teacher developed a Readers for Organized Literacy Education (Readers Olé) Program. This program engaged older children to come to the school and read to younger children. In addition, once a month a celebrity visitor came to do the reading (celebrities included parents, grandparents, and community leaders). Bringing celebrities into the school enabled the program to make children aware of the richness of skills, talents, and experiences of families in the community. It also let parents apply their newly acquired consciousness of literacy issues, such as speaking to different age audiences using a suitable vocabulary. Afterwards, teachers and children received letters from the celebrities sharing new and interesting information.

Design parent conferences to facilitate two-way communication.

The two main goals of parent conferences are to share information about the child and establish a relationship among the provider, program, and family. Holding conferences with parents who are not proficient in English is especially challenging, however. One program came up with the idea of having parent round tables as an alternative way to meet the objectives of parent conferences. Grouping parents by language (which is possible if the numbers are large enough), providers invited parents to participate in round table discussions covering some of the primary issues they usually shared during parent conferences. This included key areas such as describing upcoming field trips and outlining weekly curriculum themes. Providers can also bring together all non-English proficient parents to help them feel comfortable with the communication process.

Assembling parent groups serves several purposes. Communicating with people whose primary language is not English does not necessarily have to be difficult, but it can be labor-intensive and require much concentration when trying to find a common vocabulary, checking for understanding, and even acting out or miming certain parts in conversation. Round table conferences reduce the number of times the provider has to repeat in simple words the definition of portfolio, for example. Also, parents tend to be more forthcoming and try harder to make themselves understood when they see the provider's effort to communicate. Sometimes one parent has a greater command of English than the others and can help translate key information for them.

A variation of the round table idea is to bring in a volunteer from the community to assist in the round table discussion. After the provider presents some general information, the volunteer leads the group in an activity and responds to any questions they generate. This gives the provider the chance to hold a series of one-on-one conversations with parents to focus on an individual child's progress and development and establish a rapport with the parents.

Implement a parent involvement awareness, orientation, and training program to meet the informational needs of providers and parents.

Experience shows that programs need to conduct several different types of training for a parent involvement program to be effective. Providers who are extremely knowledgeable about early childhood practices often benefit from classes on bilingual language learning and second language acquisition, as well as building cultural and ethnic awareness (Anderson, 1996). Conversely, some programs with large bilingual populations hire providers and assistants who have strong language skills but who, not having expertise in early childhood practices, need basic training in the rationale for the program's goals and policies and in ways of caring for children.

Instruction in the theory of first and second language acquisition also helps providers learn how to help parents make an informed decision about which language to emphasize at home. Parents often receive conflicting information regarding their children's ability to succeed in school if they primarily speak their native language at home. Trained providers can advise parents in the debate over which language to stress at home, clearly explaining why they should support the first language in the home. Providers can assure parents that it is through competency in the first language that second language ability grows. Once a child can read, speak using a string of words, and build complex sentences, then the child can transfer those skills to English.

Another important training topic for providers and parents both is learning how to interact with people from different backgrounds and accept their uniqueness. For diversity training to be effective, participants must build a climate of trust. They must discuss issues related to prejudice and bias in an environment that promotes safety, confidence, and opportunities for individuals to practice new ways of acting and responding to people and events. Establishing a common vocabulary for communicating also facilitates interactions with and among families from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which in turn leads to a greater appreciation of individual families' circumstances. It is especially important for providers to reach a level of comfort when confronting tough issues related to caring for children and

families with different backgrounds and experiences. Learning more about a specific group or culture increases providers' understanding of how to interact effectively with people from other cultures. Ideally, diversity training results in their professional and personal beliefs reflecting an increased awareness and empathy. Programs must remember, however, that cultural competence is not gained quickly, and to achieve it requires effort, commitment, and motivation.

In one school-based program, parents and families expressed a desire for training in many areas, including learning English, working with social service systems, and gaining strategies for applying for a job. Since parents did not directly request parenting classes or an orientation to the program, providers developed activities responding to the topics parents named, but delivered them in such a way as to expose the families to quality early childhood practices and techniques. English language classes mirrored the format of the children's daily morning meeting or school assembly: A typical class might include learning welcome phrases, introductions, and some form of social engagement followed by instructional activities and games to teach English.

Using graphs, charts, and role playing activities, parents in the program also conducted orientations on how to navigate the social services system. Teachers benefited from these volunteer efforts by learning about community services from the user perspective, fnding out how to access services, and discovering how to take advantage of them. At the same time, parent speakers felt a strong sense of accomplishment as they taught other parents in an engaging manner. By responding to each other's needs, these parent volunteers and participants became advocates for bringing in other families to the program's parent involvement events.

Let changes evolve at a natural pace because absorbing new ideas takes time.

Once program participants recognize the need to change their parent involvement component, they often feel a strong sense of urgency to implement improvements quickly. It takes time, however, to develop successful partnerships with families.

Everyone in the program community needs to understand that many different kinds of adjustments are occurring simultaneously. It is important to let change evolve naturally without trying to control it or force it to fit preconceived ideas.

A particularly telling anecdote illustrating that it takes everyone time to integrate new knowledge relates to a group of teachers who had just completed several hours of inservice training seminars on cultural awareness, linguistic diversity, and second language learning. After taking the course, someone overheard a teacher saying, "I think that Thiep is faking when he acts like he can't talk," a statement that not only lacks sensitivity but also shows that the teacher did not absorb the fact presented in class that children may experience a silent period when learning another language (Cummins, 1989). Most people require not only training, but time and support to assimilate new information and modify their behavior.

Providers and parent volunteers, too, can facilitate change. For example, they might prepare parents to participate actively in parent conferences by helping them understand the purpose of the conference and their role in it. They may use role play to demonstrate the conference scenario, make the types of comments a provider might share with parents, and give parents ideas for questions such as, "Has my child improved how he behaves with other children in the last two months, and how did you get him to stop pushing his classmates?" This sort of guidance is particularly helpful as children prepare to go from one classroom provider to another or to make the transition from child care program to kindergarten.

Another consideration that is encouraging rapid implementation of a new parent involvement component is the desire to satisfy accountability reports and monitor participation. Those who want to move the project forward are cautioned to avoid false starts by making sure that they have a comprehensive plan that takes into account all the suggestions generated from the leader and stakeholder team's questionnaire.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing and maintaining a quality parent involvement component can overwhelm both providers and parents, even when it is they who have advocated for these activities. While starting or revising a parent involvement component presents organizational challenges, providers and families also face a distinct set of barriers to their participation in and support of the new offerings. Determining the constraints to attendance at family activities is a sixth — or constant — step in the model described above. The reality of personal, professional, social, economic, and time issues can significantly influence parents' and providers' decisions about participating in parent involvement events. It is important to identify and examine the barriers to active parent participation, especially because they may reveal other difficulties that are part of a family's daily life. Programs should not use constraints as excuses for low parent participation; rather, they should take them into consideration when deciding how to shape the parent involvement component.

While this section does not suggest solutions to the potential hindrances to parent participation in the learning activities of their children, the hope is that by understanding constraints, program designers find alternative strategies for parental inclusion. Determining the constraints to the acceptance and use of a parent involvement component underlies each step of implementation. Although not exhaustive, the following list highlights the interrelatedness of the challenges:

Location of child care site

In previous decades, children were cared for at home or by a neighbor (Dowell, 1996); parents did not travel great distances for child care services, if they traveled at all. Today, while some children may attend child care in the community, many go to programs, schools, or homes located near a parent's job, near the workplace or home of another relative, or in convenient proximity to the person responsible for picking up the child before the program's closing time. Any of these sites may be a great distance from the child's home.

Parents base the decisions on where to send their children on many factors, including facilities available in their neighborhood or community (or lack thereof). Some families may opt for their children to attend a program that immerses them in a specific language, such as French or Chinese, while others may want to enroll their children in a focused-curriculum program, such as an Afrocentric or literacy program. Eligibility criteria, too, may force a parent to select a program located clear across town. In general, the farther away the program, the less likely parents are willing to travel to attend evening events or spend more time than necessary on site.

Availability of transportation to the child care site and concerns about the safety of the site and/or transportation to it

Families might need to take one or more buses (or forms of transport) to reach the child care site. Therefore, the obligation of returning to the program in the evening for a parent activity can require more time and effort than parents are able to give. In order to attend activities held in the evening, particularly if the center is located in a poorly lit area, parents may feel they must go to or leave the site in a taxi for safety reasons, which is more expensive than riding public transportation.

Personal/family complications

If parents want to attend program functions, they may have to decide whether to leave an aging relative or a child at home alone or improperly cared for and attended. Sometimes taking part in these program functions means that parents must disrupt the homework routines of older siblings or sacrifice the bedtime schedules of younger children. Family finances also come into play in multiple ways. For example, parents may hold down two jobs or work odd hours, limiting their ability to participate.

Issues related to cultural diversity

Parents whose language or cultural background is different from that of other parents or providers in the program can face what they perceive as added roadblocks. Linguistically or culturally diverse families may find parent meetings and events unfamiliar or intimidating. They may believe that they do not have a role to play or that they cannot contribute. These feelings lead to low attendance and participation rates.

It is equally important not to misinterpret situations. For example, regardless of the cultural or ethnic group, parents generally respect providers and their knowledge. Some groups, however, demonstrate respect through nodding silently and concurring with whatever the provider says, whether or not they understand what is being said. Conversely, some groups show respect by attending meetings prepared to talk and engage the provider, entering into emotional verbal discourse. Unfortunately, providers often perceive silent nodding as more respectful than the latter behavior, which is often considered aggressive or confrontational, though it, too, is intended as a form of respect.

Providers also must acknowledge that how and where they were raised influences their approach to caring for children. Many people, including lifelong teachers, find it difficult to articulate how and why they interact in certain ways or emphasize certain things. In some instances providers may not realize that the way they choose to do something is different or unusual from the way the families of the children they care for do things (Dowell, 1996). Differences in such basic daily events such as eating or playing or in values such as cleanliness and discipline reflect the different ways people were taught. Research shows that people are often unaware of how deeply their beliefs are conditioned by their own cultural experiences, and that they tend to think that the validity of their beliefs is universal (Harry, Torguson, Katkavich, & Guerrero, 1993). Providers must be especially careful not to interpret the actions of parents through their own cultural experiences, thus unwittingly creating barriers to parent involvement.

Barriers to Overcome for Open and Reciprocal Communication

Parent meetings have their own set of challenges that may hinder participation:

- Issues related to a program population that speaks multiple languages, such as families with varying English proficiency levels; misconstrued communications; or the unavailability of interpreters
- Cultural differences, reflected, for example, in the number of children and other people who accompany the parent to a meeting or the fact that someone other than the parent is the family spokesperson
- Chronic lateness in arriving at meetings
- Attitudes that appear or are interpreted as apathetic or uncooperative
- Parents' negative memories of school and the learning environment
- Parents' negative impressions of past parent meetings
- Parents' discomfort with the expectations or requirements set by the program
- Parents' feeling that they are being evaluated or chastised as inadequate childrearers

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING SUCCESSFUL CROSS-CULTURAL PARENT-PROVIDER PARTNERSHIPS

The following strategies enable providers to understand families from different cultures better and to begin healthy, constructive parent-provider relationships that increase parent involvement. Providers should:

- *Attend pre- and inservice training.*
  Programs need to encourage providers to go to workshops and seminars that give them the opportunity to study research about parent involvement, to examine their beliefs about diverse families and communities, to learn techniques for working with families from different backgrounds, and to try out what they have learned in the work environment.

- *Observe families and the community as much as possible in order to understand them better and consider whether what they have observed should influence classroom practices.*
  Opportunities abound for providers to learn from watching children and their parents. Providers can go to a park to see young children at play and watch parents when they pick up and drop off their children. It is useful to listen to the vocabulary, phrasing patterns, and intonation parents use. Watching parents' interactions with their children reveals how spacing between individuals during conversation, looks, and touching vary among cultures and families within a culture.

It is important to go out into the community as well, trying to look at it from the insider point of view, not as a visitor just passing through. Providers should try to imagine how families see their respective neighborhoods and what in the community helps children feel safe. They might go into local churches, restaurants, or the local corner store. It is important to reflect upon what they see, trying to determine, for instance, who the owner of a store is, who the employees are, and whether these people reflect the buying community.

- *Ask questions without fear or embarrassment and do not assume that others know the answers.*
  Parents, community members, and other resources in the community, as well as other providers, all have useful information to share.

- *Realize that parents do not necessarily know how to raise children just because they are parents.*
  Many parents appreciate providers' efforts to share their expertise. Parents value hearing providers' explanations of children's developmental stages and appropriate behavior, methods of disciplining children, proper nutrition, and ways of mixing learning and play. Providers must carefully discern, however, which parents actually need help with parenting skills and which parents are simply using childrearing practices unique to a particular culture but unfamiliar to providers.

- *Acknowledge that families face many difficult problems and let parents know that that is a "normal" condition.*
  With the intent of linking families to needed services, providers

may need to ask family members probing questions about the issues they are facing. Providers may have to ask a family how they are managing several times in several different ways.

- *Find out who parents view as role models.*
  Knowing whether parents turn to television, their community, or historical figures as models of good parenting, personal success, and improving their family's well-being helps providers positively influence parents. Providers also should learn the family's values, by encouraging parents to talk about the way they were raised and the people they admire.

- *Try to learn about different cultural groups' history, values, and accepted behavior.*
  Providers can broaden their awareness of different cultures by talking to parents and other providers. They should analyze the similarities and differences among various groups, learning about their norms and comparing them to their own cultural upbringing.

- *Never assume that parents know how to get involved or that they feel comfortable doing so.*
  Families may be unfamiliar with the concept of parent involvement and not understand how to interpret invitations to collaborate. Parents with different backgrounds from the providers or other parents in the program might feel alienated or isolated, particularly in a school environment. Providers must help parents make the transition into active program participation and be a part of their children's learning environment.

- *Give parents jobs to do.*
  Providers should assume that parents want to participate in activities and can carry out the tasks they are asked to perform. Providers should be prepared, however, to give parents guidance on how to do a task. For example, when asking a parent to bring in snacks, the provider and parent together should discuss and agree upon what foods (and amounts) would be suitable, especially since the provider and parent may be unfamiliar with the items the other considers acceptable. It is also important to listen to parents' suggestions about how they think they could participate or contribute and what they can share that is unique to their country.

- *Help parents become advocates for their children.*
  Providers should share relevant program information and teach parent strategies for making the most of the program. In particular, parents need to understand the expectations and goals of the program, the curriculum, safety rules, the roles of program staff, and ways to set up community boards or committees.

- *Pay attention to personal feelings, discomforts, and uncertainties and try to discover their origins.*
  These feelings of unease may indicate that the provider is experiencing style or opinion differences with the family. Not attending to these difficulties can compromise the partnership and lead to misunderstandings.

- *Be prepared in advance to handle common conflicts or disagreement, and teach parents how to resolve them.*
  Let families know that there may be times when the goals of the program differ from those of the home and inform parents that they can do something when this happens. Paralysis does not have to occur because of divisive issues (Gerzon, 1997). Providers must teach parents to treat conflict as an opportunity for growth and positive learning experiences. For instance, timeliness is valued highly in the United States, whereas some cultures take a more relaxed attitude toward time. In this case, some parents may need to learn to bring their children to the program on time and say a less-extended goodbye; on the flip side, they may also decrease their tardiness to work.

- *Become a curious investigator and an agent for change.*
  Providers should try to experience some of the predicaments that families face. For example, they could ride the bus during rush hour and imagine what it would feel like if they knew they were late to work but still had to drop the baby off at child care, or if they had exactly enough money for the bus trip but had forgotten to pick up a bus transfer. Putting themselves in parents' shoes is usually an eye-opener and should help providers consider what changes the program can make to accommodate these types of situations.

To implement the model of parent involvement presented here, providers need to be able to spend time and energy learning about the families of the children in their care. They need direct and strong support from their programs, especially if they are to conduct home visits and organize parent activities off the program site. Moreover, the increased recognition and appreciation of the positive impact of parental partnerships makes evident the need for training in working with family systems and diverse families. Starting a parent involvement program is not necessarily an easy task, and sustaining the involvement of parents can potentially be even more difficult, but experience shows that parents and providers can build successful partnerships that embrace diverse cultures.

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